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ABSTRACT

The paper is an autobiographical account of an educator's early experiences in teaching adolescents with behavior problems, including his attempts to work with the students to develop a curriculum related to their lives. One such curriculum--on "crooks"--that incorporated social studies, reading, writing, and art experiences is briefly recounted. The history of education for this population is traced and three curriculum philosophies, voiced by those who focus on the needs and interests of children and youth, those who want to acquaint youth with social realities, and those who emphasize values clarification, are noted. The need for education to be centered on "real" human problems is stressed. (CL)

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Programming for Youth in Secondary Schools and the Community

William Van Til

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It isn't my topic that makes me feel humble, for as of 1983 I will have been trying to encourage educators and citizens to program for youth in school and community for a full half century. What does make me feel humble is my recognition that you who are working with behavioral disorders and with emotionally disturbed young people are working in one of the most difficult, the least appreciated, and the most poorly financed fields in all of education. What makes me feel humble is thinking back over my half century in education to my first 2 years as an educator when, completely unprepared, I tried to work with emotionally disturbed youth.

My autobiography which will be published in 1983 by Lake Lure Press under the title *My Way of Looking at It* tells of my coming out of college in 1933 at the height of the Great Depression and finding a job in a reform school after a period of unemployment. To quote:

> New York State Training School for Boys was a facility for teenage delinquent boys which had been open only a few months when I arrived. The school had no books, no paper, no pencils, no anything —except delinquents. The library contained only passed-off junk. The delinquents lived in cottages, low-lying buildings with dormitory facilities and a recreation room. After line-up on weekdays, they marched out in work gangs for a half day of work in the field and in the buildings, and for another half day of school in the Administration Building. On weekends the staff supervised and patrolled their church attendance, recreation, and even sleeping hours.
>
> The superintendent was a politician who usually remained invisible to both staff and delinquents. The assistant superintendent, the day-by-day boss, was a tough S.O.B. who administered corporal punishment to boys who tried to "breeze" (escape) or otherwise rebel. The director of the education program was cultured, kind, and ineffectual.
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> Later I described my first day in a National Education Association pamphlet on discipline. "When, in a barren classroom, I first faced teenage delinquents. I felt like a character in a Kafka nightmare. I saw before me boys who were sullen or mocking or hostile. As to discipline, the choice presented me seemed stark. Either I must put into these delinquents the fear of the master — namely me — through every scrap

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William Van Til, *My Way of Looking at It*, Lake Lure Press, RR 32, Box 316, Terre Haute, Indiana 47803.
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of authority I could muster, including a coercive curriculum, or I must jointly with them develop a curriculum somehow related to their lives. I gambled on the latter course."

Somehow I lived through those first two weeks. I got the boys to talk about how it happened that they had been sent to Warwick. Amazingly enough, all seemed to be innocent of the crimes for which they had been sentenced; they freely "snowed" the new teacher in hope of his support when they came before The Committee for consideration of possible probation. They talked about their lives in Harlem and Bedford Stuyvesant, their brothers' stays in jails, their favorite fighters, their experiences on the streets, and what they hated most about school. Boasting and lies predominated. Yet I came to know them as individuals.

After an eternity, I was granted a weekend pass, a twice-a-month privilege. I went from local library to local library in Corona and Flushing and loaded up with library books on the elementary level that had anything to do with what the boys had talked about — crime, boxing, adventures, etc. Later I learned that such library exploitation was unethical. But at the time I was too young and desperate to have ethics. My sister supplied me with paper, pencils, and materials from her school, courtesy of the New York City school system; the statutes of limitations on her crimes have no doubt long ago expired. The local butcher gave me sheets of wrapping paper for artwork by the boys. My girlfriend got me a scrapbook for my "project," biographies of contemporary celebrities to be composed by my delinquents.

Bored by the surrounding nothingness, some of the boys used some of the accessions, including free materials wangled from a variety of companies and groups. Some read simple books; few wrote anything at all. Some tried remedial work. One boy spent most of his school half day drawing a frieze of boats, from Phoenician galleys to ocean liners. Some just sat and glowered or picked fights....

Somehow I survived that year at Warwick and even scored some small triumphs. For instance, I never physically struck a boy — which is just as well, for many of these veterans of street fighting could have easily thrashed or knifed me (in the school shops boys secretly made knives of any available metal). Nor was I ever struck or cut by a boy. Many of them came to recognize that I wanted to help them and most at least recognized that I intended them no harm. When I left Warwick in June of 1934 for a summer of study at Columbia and an attempt to write at my family bungalow, the school newspaper bid me adieu sadly through a long story and a sentimental editorial.

After a year I went to a very different school, the experimental school of Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. My autobiography, *My Way of Looking at It*, reports on my experience.

My limited reputation as a reform school teacher had preceded me. Consequently, the faculty also included in my teaching schedule a strange assignment. Based on their experiences of the first years, they identified a dozen boys of the 10th and 11th grades who were having problems which ranged from apathy to insubordination. They included a charming personable youth whose ideas sounded totalitarian to me, a rebellious basketball player, a lad who had already had some scrapes with the law, a runaway from home, several unmotivated young men,

and some who, though not retarded, were obviously below the usual intellectual level of the student body. Ergo, reasoned the faculty, we will see what Lindquist's young phenom from the reform school will do with this heady mix; since the new teacher had a background in English and the social studies, we'll ask him to teach both fields to our problem boys.

In those days, I was a primitive progressive. I had gotten the message that you should begin with the expressed interests of the learners. Operationally, I knew little else. So when my problem dozen gathered in the round, heavily mirrored, and comfortably couched reception room for our daily two hours together, I simply did what came naturally. Recalling the early reform school hours, I had each boy introduce himself at length. My authoritarian boy particularly enjoyed being the center of the stage as he explained why an elite would inherit the earth. The boys also listened with interest to my own autobiography, including some colorful tales out of Warwick. After our introductions, I pointed out that I hadn't asked to teach them and they hadn't asked for me as their teacher, but we were stuck with each other and might as well make the best of it. Then I asked them what they wanted to learn about. My question was put flatly; it was without elaboration or qualification.

There was a long silence. Then my young authoritarian signaled through body language that he was taking over and that the group should follow his lead. "We can sutdy whatever we want, Mr. Van Til, right?"

"Right."

"Then I know what we'd like to learn about, Mr. Van Til. We'd like to learn about crooks. All about crooks. Is that okay with you, Mr. Van Til, for us to learn all about crooks?"

The basketball star added, "Yeah, Mr. Van Til, for some of these guys it would be like vocational education."

I was at a crossroads. I could either stand pat or scuttle by saying, "Well, you know what I meant. This program is primarily social studies plus language arts skills so you can choose to study about Greece or Rome or the Middle Ages or a period in American history. But naturally not about crooks." Instead I chose to remain with my primitive progressive approach. As Robert Frost put it, "Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I — I took the one less traveled by and that has made all the difference."

So we studied about crooks. We went to the police station for information. We borrowed a doctoral dissertation on crime from the library and the boys found out what you and I already know, that multiple problem areas existed in Columbus as in other cities and that if the maps in the dissertation were superimposed on each other the various social problems would overlap. High crime areas were also areas of high infant mortality, venereal disease, and poor health and housing conditions. But this generalization was new to the sophomores and juniors in my class. We piled into cars to visit high crime areas, then planned a picture-taking campaign in the slums. We developed our photographs and made maps and charts to display in hall cases for the edification of the rest of the student body.

When the exhibits went up, the boys got some satisfying feedback from the rest of the school. I began to congratulate myself as I ticked off

the social science concepts, the scientific generalizations, the art experiences, and the substantial reading and writing of the past few weeks. I contemplated the study that was emerging, an examination of what we could do about the conditions that we observed. (The crime study led into a study of housing, including the public vs. private housing controversy of the era. The housing study led into the study of race when one of our guides proved to be a highly educated black. "You know why he's so smart? Because he's got white blood. Isn't that how they get smart, Mr. Van Til?" "Let's look it up," I said.)

But pride goeth before a fall. One morning I was sitting in my office opposite one of the exhibit cases. Unaware of my presence, one of my boys was giving a lecture to a friend about the relationship of social problems to social class, as manifested by our charts. I was proud of him. Impressed, his auditor said, "You work on this with that new teacher?" "Yes." "Is he any good?" "Good?", said my boy contemptuously, "Good? He doesn't even have a book!"

I could have been so much more effective if I could have had the insights offered by a fine conference program. How much better prepared I would have ce programbeen if I had understood the varied types of behavioral disorders, the possible causes of emotional disturbances, the models and instruments for assessing students and evaluating programs, the possible agency interventions, the research in your field! I envy you your opportunities to pick and choose throughout the varied programs of important conferences so that you can be still more effective professionals.

I appear not as a specialist on emotionally disturbed young people but as one who will try to briefly summarize developments in meeting personal and social and value-related needs of "normal" adolescents through school and community programs. As always in education, one must begin with culture.

You will recall that when you have traveled through the Appalachians or Rocky Mountains, you reached high points called watersheds from which the water flowed on one side toward an ocean and on the other side toward eventual arrival in the Gulf of Mexico. The historian Henry Steele Commager has pointed out that at the beginning of the 20th century America crossed a watershed in history. Education was also at a watershed at the beginning of the 20th century. On the side called past, education relied heavily on academic instruction through the separate subjects. On the side called future, education quested for relevant and meaningful learning by children and youth through subjects, interdisciplinary study, and action-learning. On the side called past was education designed simply for college preparation and college entrance. On the side of the future was an historic 1918 report called the Cardinal Principles of Education.

The Cardinal Principles Report of 1918 recommended that the content of secondary education be based on the present and prospective lives of young people, a heretical idea from the point of view of those who saw schools as simply designed for college entrance. To the Commission, education existed to deal with seven Cardinal Principles:

1. Health
2. Command of Fundamental Processes
3. Worthy Home Membership
4. Vocation
5. Civic Education
6. Worthy Use of Leisure
7. Ethical Character

Despite the lapse of time since the Cardinal Principles Report, the central idea that the overall objectives of a school must relate to the present and prospective lives of young people, rather than to traditional subject matter categories, shines through. Since then educators have debated the question of the best ways of looking at school curriculum.

Three ways of looking at secondary education have emerged. To some educators, the curriculum should be based on the needs, interests, and wants of the individual learner. To a second school of thought, the curriculum should be based on the demands of society and the imperative social realities of the times. To a third group, the curriculum should clarify value alternatives and educate for a humane way of life.

I was fortunate enough to become acquainted with the leaders of these three schools of thought: William Heard Kilpatrick, sponsor of emphasis on needs of learners; George S. Counts, who emphasized social realities; and Boyd H. Bode, who stressed values.

William Heard Kilpatrick was the philosopher of education most identified with emphasis on the needs and interests of the learner. When I knew him he was a white-haired man who skillfully individualized his teaching of large classes. He became famous with his project method, based on student experiences, which involved the learner in problem-solving marked by analysis, judgment, discussion, and evaluation. In his writing there recurs emphasis on pupil involvement and student-centered learning through purposeful activity and intrinsic motivation. To Kilpatrick, the enemies of learning were extrinsic motivation, memorization, rote learning, and meaningless formal instruction. "We learn what we live," he reminded us.

Just as William Heard Kilpatrick symbolized a philosophy of education that stressed the needs and interests of learners, George S. Counts symbolized a philosophy which stressed social realities. Counts was charismatic, a hawk-eyed, highly rhetorical social reformer. He was acutely aware of the social problems of the decade in which he reached the apex of his influence, the 1930s. He called for a curriculum which would grapple with the social realities on the international and domestic scenes. He urged the school to throw its potential strength into a struggle to build a new society. For instance, he electrified the Progressive Education Association with an address entitled, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order.*

The views of philosopher of education Boyd H. Bode serve as a useful point of departure for demonstrating that some conceive values as central in curriculum making. Bode was humorous and relaxed, a man who conducted his classes through Socratic dialogues. He believed that the central task of education was to clarify the nature of the democratic way of life and its competitor, the authoritarian way of life.

This conflict in curriculum philosophy continues among those who call for an education based on the needs and interests of children and youth, those who call for acquainting youth with social realities, and those who believe education should help young people clarify and arrive at values. For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s a major criticism of the American school curriculum stemmed from those who called for a program based on the needs and interests of young people. They regarded the standard curriculum as sterile, lifeless, coercive and indifferent to the actual lives of children and youth.

Their books reported the failure of American education under such titles as *The Way It Spozed to Be, How Children Fail, Compulsory Mis-Education, The Under-Achieving School, The Vanishing Adolescent, The High School Revolutionaries, Growing Up Absurd, The Naked Children, The Angel Inside Went*

Sour. The smell of death even pervades some of their titles: *Our Children Are Dying, Murder in the Classroom, Death at an Early Age, School Is Dead, How to Survive in Your Native Land.* The authors were members of a group variously described as the romantic, sentimental, compassionate critics. A loosely organized alliance of kin spirits, the compassionate critics who were writing during the 1960s and 1970s included John Holt, Herbert Kohl, James Herndon, George Dennison, Jonathan Kozol, and Nat Hentoff. The books of John Holt are the most widely read of the writings by the compassionate critics.

During the middle 1970s a different group of reformers called for heavy emphasis on community participation by students and more work experiences for young people. They emphasized social needs and social realities. They pointed out that education could not be encompassed in a schoolhouse.

During the 1970s there was extensive experimentation in relating education to the surrounding community including the development of schools without walls, such as the wellknown Philadelphia experiment which was frequently emulated in other metropolitan areas. In such programs, students went to school through museums, art galleries, various workshops, factories, and offices where people made their living. Experimentation included public service by young people as they accompanied adults who were carrying out their responsibilities. Alternation took place of attendance at school and work on jobs under the supervision of school personnel. In such programs, often described as action learning, the student worked within the community with the guidance, support, and education of trained professionals.

Reform reports of the 1970s which stressed community participation and work experience by students included *Youth: Transition to Adulthood,* a report by the Panel on Youth of the President's Science Advisory Committee under the chairmanship of James S. Coleman; *The Reform of Secondary Education: A Report to the Public and the Profession* under the chairmanship of B. Frank Brown; the National Panel on High Schools and Adolescent Education appointed by the U.S. Department of Education. Such high school reform proposals encompased a variety of problems and differed from each other. However, in general the reports were critical of contemporary high schools as too large, age-segregated, overly separated, quasi-custodial environments for adolescents. Their sponsors believed that such schools do not sufficiently provide youth a transition to maturity and the adult world of work and community participation. In general, such reports supported smaller and more diverse schools which were age-integrated and community-related. They called for both academic and action learning. They proposed to supplement schooling by alternative paths to maturity by way of business, industry work organizations, social involvement opportunities, and community education centers.

Still a third approach that developed in the 1970s was values clarification. Sponsors of the approach such as Sidney B. Simon, Leland W. Howe, and Howard Kirschenbaum said in *Values Clarification* that everyone of us meets life situations which call for thought, opinions, decisions, and action. Every decision and course of action is based on our consciously or unconsciously held attitudes, beliefs, and values. They pointed out that students, like adults, face such problems and decisions, for we live in a confusing world where we must make choices but are frequently not clear about our own values. They suggested that typical areas of confusion included politics, religion, work, leisure time, school, love, sex, family, friends, money, health, race, war-peace,

authority, personal tastes, etc. They proposed a values clarification approach to help young people answer some of their questions and build their own systems of values. They contended that they did not aim to instill any particular set of values but that they hoped to help students to think their way through and to arrive at valuing processes.

Throughout my life I've asked myself which of these three ways of looking at education was right — the people who emphasized needs, those who stressed social realities, or those who emphasized values. I can only conclude that each had a part of the truth. There's an East Indian fable of the blind man and the elephant that applies. You may remember it. One blind man encountering the elephant patted the side and pronounced it a wall. A second one grabbed the tail and pronounced it a rope. A third grabbed the trunk and concluded that the elephant was a snake. But actually it was a totality that can only be described as an elephant. Similarly I believe that each of the schools of thought I have described has only part of the truth.

I never met John Dewey. He was before my time. But I read his writings and such books as *Democracy in Education*, and *Experience in Education* gave me clues. Dewey taught me that we have to draw on each of these three ways of looking at education. I learned the importance of both/and rather than either/or.

Fred T. Wilhelms, as experienced educational organization administrator, once told me that educators cannot bear more than one thing in mind simultaneously. I think this is true. What Fred was pointing out was that in the 1920s we developed a child-centered school. In the 1930s we were concerned about depression, the international scene, and a society-centered school. In the 1940s values were paramount because of World War II. In the 1950s the emphasis shifted to social demands for more science and mathematics because of Sputnik. In the turbulent 1960s the needs of young people were most important because of the black and youth revolutions. In the 1970s opinion was divided as I have just indicated.

So I hope that in the 1980s people will bear more than one thing in mind simultaneously. Let us hope that curriculum builders will take into account the needs and interests of young people, the crucial social realities of the time, and the need to develop humane values. With these in mind they might then create more helpful subject matter and interdisciplinary content.

Today in the 1980s the struggle still goes on between those who look back to the past and those who look to the future. Some who look back to the 19th century side of the watershed still see schools as places for traditional education where students memorize material that has little relationship to life and where they give back through rote recitation. Students in such schools — and there are many — are not treated as individuals. Motivation is ignored. Life begins at 3:30.

But other educators call for 20th century schools that provide education related to life today and in the future and that reconcile needs, social realities, and values. For instance they call for education about war and peace, and about the interrelated problems of pollution, population, and energy. They ask for study of economic problems in government and how to be a good consumer. Their students consider conflicting world views and the ways of varied ethnic groups. They have experiences in the arts and they learn to use their leisure. They learn about themselves and their personal development and about family life and good health. Students in modern schools learn about vocations through work experience and about the community through participation in community activities.

Some may say they will not learn to communicate in such modern schools. Not so — they will read, write, and talk extensively about such matters as those I have just named. Some say students in modern schools will know little history. Again this is nonsense. They will relate study of the past to the present and the future and will learn history.

I sympathize with and support such 20th century efforts as these because I believe in education being centered on real human problems. I have made my case for a problem-centered education in four books I have written in the past eight years, *Education: A Beginning, Curriculum: Quest for Relevance, Secondary Education: School and Community*, all published by Houghton Mifflin, and in a yearbook, *Issues in Secondary Education*, published by the National Society for the Study of Education. I have made the case for a problem-centered education in my autobiography, *My Way of Looking at It*.

The struggle between the 19th and the 20th centuries still goes on. You and I are inevitably a part of it. I urge you to encourage efforts to help youth through programs which meet the needs and interests of young people, that throw light on the social realities of our times, and that help youth to arrive at and act upon humane values. Such programs hold promise for better education for children and youth through school and society.

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